

DON'T LOOK BACK

By Andrew Wilson
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Ephesians 6:10-18
Luke 9:57-62

I want to do something kind of unusual this morning. Partly to celebrate our nation's independence, I want to explore with you an amazing story about a handful of American heroes. It's a story of incredible perseverance. This story has given me a new understanding of Jesus' words in Luke, chapter 9, verse 62: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven." I hope it will do the same for you.

They were known as the Corps of Discovery. Their leaders were Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. They were the first Americans to explore the Missouri River waterway and the Pacific Northwest. Their story is one of the greatest adventure stories of all time.

July 4, 1803 was our nation's 27th birthday. Two days before that celebration, on July 2, exactly 203 years ago today, President Thomas Jefferson received the news that Napoleon Bonaparte had agreed to sell the vast French Territory of Louisiana to the United States. With the Louisiana Purchase, the nation essentially doubled in size overnight. The cost to Congress was \$15 million, or about 3 cents per acre. The purchase included the modern day states west of the Mississippi River, as well as the modern day states along the Missouri River drainage. Most of the region had never been explored. The northern area, especially, was a land of mystery and legend.

Though in retrospect it seems like the Americans were taking advantage of the French, and getting the better of the deal, that's not how Napoleon viewed the situation at the time of the land sale. Napoleon knew of American ambitions to build an empire stretching "from sea to shining sea." He knew that if he refused to sell French territories in North America the Americans, or perhaps the British, would eventually try to take them by force. At the same time, Napoleon's recent military operations had left him desperately in need of cash. French forces led by Napoleon's brother-in-law, Charles Leclerc, had been unsuccessful in their efforts to quell a massive slave revolt in Saint-Domingue, or modern day Haiti. On the heels of that Caribbean defeat, Napoleon was gearing up for war with Britain. By selling French territory to the Americans, Napoleon not only fed his war machine, he also hurt the British by enlarging the empire of their natural rivals across the Atlantic.

None of that is essential to the story of Lewis and Clark, but I'm including those details for those of you who know and love the Haitian people. Few of us today acknowledge our nation's historical debt to the Haitian slaves who fought so bravely for their freedom. Had General Leclerc defeated them, Napoleon probably would not have been motivated to sell the Louisiana territory to America.

Thomas Jefferson was a naturalist and an adventurer to the core, and he ached to know more about territories to the west. His plan to send a party of explorers up the Missouri had been concocted many months before the Louisiana Territory had been secured. Of course the Louisiana Purchase only made him more anxious to follow through with his plan. Jefferson was convinced that the region to the northwest along the upper reaches of the Missouri River was rich in new animals, plants and minerals. The Lewis and Clark expedition would have been fully justified just on the basis of the scientific knowledge to be gained from it.

But Jefferson and hundreds of other statesmen and business leaders in America had another, more pragmatic reason for wanting to explore the region. Many suspected the Pacific Ocean could be reached along a route defined mostly by navigable rivers. If this were true – if the great Northwest Passage could be found – it would only be a matter of time before the American empire stretched across the continent.

The president lost didn't look very far a field in selecting someone to lead the journey. He authorized his trusted personal secretary, 28-year-old Meriwether Lewis, to prepare for the journey of a lifetime. "The object of your mission," Jefferson told Lewis, "is to explore the Missouri River [to] the Pacific Ocean." It was the kind of mission that Lewis had been dreaming about for more than a decade. Lewis had less than five years of formal education, but Jefferson arranged for him to receive tutorial training in botany, zoology, navigation, medicine and other technical fields from some of the nation's top scientists. He also secured a large budget for the project from Congress.

Imagine the excitement, the gratitude, and the sheer terror Lewis felt as he left the comforts of the White House, or the President's house as it was known then. Lewis was being asked to take a journey without maps into territory that was known to be inhabited by hostile Indian tribes. He would be gone for at least a year and a half, possibly much more. He would be leaving family and friends, and a prestigious position at the President's right hand. He and his handpicked team would be living mainly off the land. Were something to happen to them, there would be no one on hand to help, or even to give them a decent burial. They would be on their own.

We know a lot about Lewis and Clark, but very little about the 30 or so young men who served under them. We know they must have been daring and courageous. We get some idea of the physical stress they endured from the Captains' journals. For example, we learn that they were working so hard during the long pull up the Missouri that they were consuming an average of 10 pounds of meat per person, per day. We also know they sometimes shirked their duties, especially during the first months of the expedition, and that Lewis and Clark had several of them whipped 100 times for their negligence or laziness.

The Corps of Discovery included a black man named York who was Clark's personal slave. And after the Corps' winter stay in present day North Dakota, a Native American girl named Sacagawea joined them. Sacagawea was about 15 years old, and was married to a Frenchman. She and her husband were brought along because of their linguistic skills, but Sacagawea proved to be useful in other ways. In fact, the journals of the Captains make it clear that the girl saved the entire party from total disaster on more than one occasion. Sacagawea was five months pregnant when she and her husband joined the team. Incredibly, she gave birth and carried her son with her throughout the entire western portion of the expedition. Of course Sacagawea has been memorialized in our day on our one dollar coin.

The Corps of Discovery suffered enormously. During the spring and summer, mosquitoes were a constant source of aggravation. In present day South Dakota the Corps narrowly escaped massacre at the hands of the Teton Sioux. Farther northwest, Lewis had two terrifying encounters with grizzly bears. One of the bears attacked a whole party of armed men, and continued to chase after them as they fired on him. The bear went into the river after one of them, and it certainly would have killed him had the men on the bank not continued to shoot at it. When they got the bear's dead body ashore they found it had taken 8 musket balls to stop it.

But mosquitoes and wild animals were the least of their concerns. Diarrhea and fever struck one man after another. It took them nearly a month to portage around the series of waterfalls on the

Missouri in western Montana. Pushing with all their might, walking up cliffs and over prickly pear cactus, they could barely go one mile a day. At one point during the portage they were bloodied by hail balls the size of apples.

Later, when the Corps left the Missouri and headed into the mountains on the border of present day Montana and Idaho, the game that had been so plentiful on the plains seemed to disappear. During their long trek over the snowy passes of the Bitterroot Range they came close to starvation. In fact, had it not been for the Nez Pierce Indians, who befriended them, and traded with them, and guided them to the Columbia River, the Corps of Discovery would have perished in the Bitterroots.

As you probably remember, Lewis and Clark did make it to the Pacific. They spent the second winter of their two-and-a-half year journey on the Oregon coast. Some of the team fell in love with the Western mountains and stayed there to explore and seek their fortunes in the fur trade. But most of the team traveled all the way back to St. Louis.

What an awesome journey it had been! They had traveled over 4,000 miles. They had passed through a land of breathtaking beauty. They had gathered dozens of specimens of plants and animals that were completely unknown to science. They had mapped a good portion of the northern and western reaches of the Louisiana Purchase. And, to the great disappointment of their president, they had discovered that there was no easy water route to the Pacific shore.

The members of the Corps of Discovery were treated as heroes everywhere they went. The U S Congress saw fit to double the amount of land it had originally agreed to reward each man upon his return. The only person not so rewarded was York, Clark's slave. York was kept in servitude another 5 years, after which time Clark finally freed him. The only casualty throughout the journey occurred during the first leg. Near present day Sioux City, Iowa, a sergeant named Floyd died of what appears to have been peritonitis resulting from a ruptured appendix.

It seems to me there were a few basic reasons why the journey of Lewis and Clark was such an amazing success.

The first reason was that they had been commissioned in their service by Thomas Jefferson. Every person in the Corps of Discovery understood that the President himself was counting on them, and rooting for them, and thinking about them every day. That had to be wonderfully inspiring to them.

The second reason the mission was successful was because Corps had been mobilized to work as a military team. They never could have made it to the Pacific and back by themselves. Each individual depended on the entire group for survival. They conducted themselves with the seriousness of a platoon engaged in battle. Lewis and Clark were brilliant leaders and excellent disciplinarians. And the one who seemed to be the least among them – the teenage Indian girl named Sacagawea – proved to be the most valuable team member of all.

There was one more reason the mission was a success – the most important one of all. Once they left the safety and comfort of St. Louis, *the Corps of Discovery never looked back*. As they pulled from sunrise to sunset against the Missouri's powerful current, I'm sure they wondered about the dangers that lay ahead. I'm sure they doubted they would be able to survive the physical stress. You can imagine how tempted they must have been during the first 1,000 miles to turn their boat around.

But the river itself helped them to focus. It defined their path. It kept their minds focused. It provided a huge but manageable challenge, as long as it was faced one day at a time. So they didn't look back. They set their sights ahead of them, up that big, muddy river. And they trained themselves to welcome the adventures of each new day.

The journey of life presents us with choices every day. Are we going to join the crowd that's drifting comfortably downstream? Or are we going to head upstream, against the current, and into the strange new world God wants to show us? That was the choice God gave Abraham when he told him to leave his birthplace and head to a new land that he was going to give him. That was the choice he gave the Hebrew people as they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, searching for their new homeland. That was the choice he gave to Jesus himself, as he was led into the wilderness, and the devil tempted him with the world's treasures. That was the choice Jesus gave his disciples when he said to them, "Leave your homes and your families, and come follow me." And that's the choice he gives us every morning as we wake up and get out of bed.

The Corps of Discovery persevered because it was commissioned by President Jefferson. We persevere because we've been commissioned in our work by Jesus Christ.

The Corps of Discovery persevered because they worked as a team organized for battle. We persevere because we travel with our brothers and sisters in the Lord, and we never fight alone.

The Corps of Discovery persevered because they never looked back. We persevere because we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the 'perfecter of our faith'.

The Letter to the Ephesians tells us to "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power." It tells us to "put on the whole armor of God": the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and the helmet of salvation. We're to carry with us the shield of faith and "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

Some Christians are offended by militaristic images of Christian life. But the New Testament makes it clear that, if we want to follow the Lord, the journey of life is going to be a struggle. Who do we struggle against? Again, reading from Ephesians:

"...our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood" – in other words, it isn't against a traditional army – "but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Remember the ancient story of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah? God warned Lot and his family to flee from the fire and brimstone he was going to send because of the great sin God found there. He told them they would be safe as long as they left immediately, and didn't look back. But Lot's wife didn't listen. She cast a glance over her shoulder. She wanted to get one more look at the town she had grown to love. And in that instant she was turned into a pillar of salt.

"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Those aren't harsh, angry words. They're the words of a commander who knows our hearts, and all its weaknesses. They're the words of a master who knows that if we look back, we're never going to make it. That's why, in the gospels, Jesus tells the disciples again and again to keep their hearts and minds fixed on the adventure ahead:

“No one can serve 2 masters,” he says, “for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other” [Matthew 6:24].

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?... But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” [Matthew 6:25, 33].

Most people who give up in their walk with Christ do so simply because it’s hard, and they get homesick, and they look back and lose their confidence. But many others give up because they find that the journey doesn’t meet their expectations. It isn’t what they thought it was going to be. They were looking for the fireworks of a pitched battle. They expected they would be climbing mountains, or staring down grizzly bears. But instead God started their journey with a 40-day march through the desert. And they lost interest in the cause.

Jesus said, “He who endures to the end will be saved” [Matthew 10:22]. If we want to live victoriously we can’t live with regret. We can’t keep looking over our shoulder, or to the right or left, wondering if we’ve made the right decision in following Jesus. Perseverance often means looking beyond the tedium of the moment to the glory that lies ahead. Every disciple of Christ faces dry spells, and long dark nights. And it’s in those dry spells and dark nights that we take comfort from the testimony of other Christians. We look to those who endured similar trials without complaining or turning aside, and who went on to live lives full of adventure and discovery.

Most of the time, striving for the kingdom of God and his righteousness means simply keeping a steady hand at the oar, or the plow, or at whatever station God has assigned to you. We all experience times in our lives when we find ourselves just plodding along, apparently accomplishing very little. What we need to realize is that God uses those days as days of preparation. A day comes for all of us when there *are* mountains to climb, and carnivores to face. And if we’ve learned persistence – if we have learned to plod on even when our adrenaline isn’t pumping – we find we’re ready for the hard stuff.

Think of the work of the sculptor chipping away at a block of marble. The first hundred times she hits the block nothing happens. Then, suddenly, on the one-hundred-and-first hit, the stone breaks. To an observer it might appear that the last blow is the only one that counts. But the sculptor knows that every blow of the hammer is needed. Every blow weakens the stone so that the final break will be clean and precise.

Perseverance is the virtue that enables us to grow in all the other virtues. We may begin our relationship with Christ with a meager supply of integrity, compassion or courage. But if we can just persevere in obedience, whether we’re running the rapids or pulling upstream, eventually we’ll grow in every virtue.

Perseverance is a virtue that’s demonstrated in the lives of many great Americans. Perseverance is what makes American great.

Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, “To map out a course of action and follow it to an end requires courage.”

Abraham Lincoln admitted, “I’m a slow walker, but I never walk back.”

Josh Billings, the nineteenth century American humorist, said: “Be like a postage stamp – stick to one thing until you get there.”

Helen Keller advised, “Do not think of today’s failures, but of the success that may come tomorrow. You have set yourselves a difficult task, but you will succeed if you persevere, and you will find a joy in overcoming obstacles.”

B. C. Forbes, the founder of Forbes Magazine, wrote, “Diamonds are only lumps of coal that stuck to their jobs.”

Dolly Parton, one of my American heroes, said, “If you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain.”

The story of Lewis and Clark is more than a great camping story. The historian Stephen Ambrose says that the journals from the journey are our national epic poem. The story continues to fire our collective imagination and to shape our national consciousness. For me, and for many Christians, the story serves as a parable about our need to keep our focus on the things that matter most. It reminds us that God calls us to head up the river when everyone else is going with the flow. It illustrates for us the incredible power of perseverance and the crucial importance of setting your sights ahead and not looking back.

The parable ends happily. The Corp members are received as heroes. They’re rewarded for their persistence and courage. And Thomas Jefferson writes this extraordinary letter of commendation for Captain Meriwether Lewis:

“Of courage undaunted, possessing a firmness and perseverance of purpose which nothing but impossibilities could divert from its direction, careful as a father to those committed to his charge, yet steady in the maintenance of order and discipline... of sound understanding and a fidelity to truth so scrupulous that whatever he should report would be as certain as if we had seen by ourselves, with all these qualifications as if selected and implanted by nature in one body, for this express purpose, I could have no hesitation in confiding the enterprise to him.”

God wants you to keep on keeping on. If you’ll persevere in faith, he’ll fill you with his Spirit, and give you the strength to do what you could never do on your own. He’ll get you up the river, over the mountain, and through the valley so that when the journey is ended, and your work is done, your life will bring glory and honor to the one who sent you in the first place.